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SIPDIS

NSC FOR CINDY COURVILLE

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PRESIDENT OBASANJO'S ROLE IN ZIMBABWE

REF: JETER-COURVILLE TELCON 7/30/01

11. (C) In a July 31 meeting scheduled to discuss other issues (septel), Ambassador Jeter, accompanied by EconOff (notetaker), raised with President Obasanjo, as promised in reftelcon, Nigeria's continuing role in addressing the deteriorating situation in Zimbabwe. Obasanjo was very forthcoming as he explained the leadership role he has played so far, in cooperation with Mbeki and others, in resolving tensions between the UK and Zimbabwe over land seizures and other issues. From his animation on this issue, it is clear that Obasanjo will remain deeply and personally engaged.

12. (C) Obasanjo commented that he first intervened in this issue in December 1999 after a meeting with Robin Cook where the Foreign Secretary had expressed deep dissatisfaction with Mugabe's unwillingness to work with the UK on the issue of voluntary sales/transfers of white-owned land to rural Zimbabweans. Obasanjo was later able to bring Mugabe and Cook together to begin a constructive dialogue. The President emphasized that Zimbabwe's neighbors, particularly South Africa and Namibia, are "frightened stiff" over the spill-over effect the land seizures could have on their own countries. Obasanjo claimed that while Mugabe believed land seizures were bringing him significant domestic political mileage, Obasanjo thought this political mileage was at the expense of the country's economic and social development.

13. (C) President Obasanjo recommended that land seizures would be more effectively addressed within a forum that also included discussion of human rights, rule of law, and democracy issues in Zimbabwe. The President declared that although Mugabe was not initially in favor of such an approach, he had since acquiesced. Obasanjo claimed that Mugabe had also agreed to stop additional land seizures, although the Zimbabwean President ultimately will seek to claim an additional 1.5 million hectares for a total of 5 million hectares of land available for sale/transfer to rural Zimbabweans.

14. (C) Obasanjo mentioned that "they" (apparently a reference to himself and Mbeki) are now looking at proposals to establish a financing mechanism to pay for the 3.5 million hectares already seized. Obasanjo alluded to a UK land fund, and mentioned others in the international community, including the U.S. and EU, who might be approached to help cover payment for 2.5 million hectares. Although the President did not give a monetary figure to the hectare purchases, he said that Mugabe wants "adequate compensation;" Obasanjo said that he favors the "willing-buyer, willing-seller" approach. Mugabe, he said, has agreed not to grab additional land until the funds are available to pay for it.

15. (C) Obasanjo chided Mugabe for seeking to address this issue through the OAU, and the inclusion of states such as Libya. The OAU effort had gone nowhere and lacked credibility. Instead, Obasanjo said he had recommended that next steps on Zimbabwe be pursued through the Commonwealth with the following countries participating: Nigeria, Jamaica, United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, and Zimbabwe. The Commonwealth Secretary General would also take part.

16. (C) Comment. The UK DCM in Abuja has told us that HMG does not believe the GON is an effective "honest broker" because public comments made by Nigerian FM Sule Lamido appear too supportive of Mugabe and GOZ hard-liners. Nevertheless, Obasanjo is likely to remain personally engaged on this issue, given his animation when addressing the subject and his penchant for involvement on issues of "high politics". End Comment.  
Jeter